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SUBJECT: UNEVENTFUL, UNPUBLICIZED, BUT NOT UNNOTICED: 30TH
ANNIVERSARY OF 1979 CHINA-VIETNAM BORDER WAR

REF: A) Hanoi 23, B) 08 Hanoi 1094

1. (SBU) The thirtieth anniversary of Vietnam's short but bloody war with China passed without incident February 17. There were no public protests and only a light police presence in Lenin Park opposite the Chinese Embassy, site of large anti-China demonstrations in December 2007. Vietnam's state and Party-controlled media did not comment on the anniversary, save for a brief (and wholly anodyne) mention in a tourist publication. Media contacts, mindful of recent reprisals against editors and journalists, confirmed that stories on this sensitive subject were understood to be off limits. The MFA was similarly silent; its China Desk confirmed that there would be no official statement.

2. (SBU) Interest was much more acute, however, on the internet. The BBC's Vietnamese-language service featured a large collection of articles and opinion pieces related to the War, most of which consisted of reasonably sober-minded (though naturally presented with a Vietnamese slant) historical analyses of the tensions that led up to the conflict. Dissident blogs were breathlessly nationalistic. One of the more articulate voices came from political activist Pham Hong Son, who excoriated Vietnam's press -- and by extension the Party leadership -- for ignoring the anniversary.

3. (SBU) Several of our contacts noted with disdain the lack of official attention to the 1979 war, particularly given the fact that Vietnam, in their eyes, won. Many criticized the recently concluded border demarcation (ref A), a sensitive topic not least because territorial disputes were cited by the Chinese as the official provocation for their two-month incursion. (Comment: Official rationales aside, China portrayed the War as a punitive response to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia the previous year; Vietnam's alignment with the Soviet Union and treatment of ethnic Chinese residents also played a role. End comment.) In a recent conversation, the Director of China Studies at the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Do Tien Sam, himself no Sinophile, was at pains to detail how each compromise was reached and how the ultimate dispensation was more than fair. Nevertheless, suspicion abounds that Vietnam was cheated.

4. (SBU) COMMENT: Reflecting on the gap between private sentiment and official silence, Hanoi University law professor Hoang Ngoc Giao suggested that in a war with the United States, the government could mobilize at most ten percent of the population, whereas ninety percent would volunteer to fight China. Bombast, almost certainly -- but not out of keeping with elite opinion. (Wider public sentiment is harder to gauge, given the lack of polling data, but anti-China feeling runs deep.) It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that Vietnam has been able to maintain a pragmatic China policy (ref B). According to Colonel Tran Nhung, the well-connected former editor of the army daily Quan Doi Nhan Dan, senior leaders in China and Vietnam last year agreed to muzzle nationalist voices critical of Sino-Vietnamese rapprochement. END

COMMENT.

15. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City.

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